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Soviets Push Biological-Weapons Work

High on the agenda of any future disarmament negotiations should be a subject that the Soviets probably won't discuss: their continuing development of biological weapons.

These include the germs and gases that you might expect to find in their forbidden arsenal. But something much more menacing has been added: The Soviets are developing biogenetically engineered poisons.

I first alerted you to this grisly threat last February, when I quoted from one of the grimmest reports to come out of the National Security Council. It warned the president that the Soviets have mastered "gene-splicing techniques as ominous as the atom-splitting discoveries that led to the nuclear bomb."

Now I have more information: The Soviets have hidden their offensive biological warfare program in the Defense Ministry's seventh main directorate, headed by Gen. V.I. Ogarkov. The CIA has determined that the program operates research and production facilities at eight different sites.

Classified CIA reports, obtained by my associate Dale Van Atta, give these chilling assessments:

- The Soviets maintain active research projects on natural poisons far more extensive than would be needed to guard against agricultural infestations or human epidemics. A secret CIA report states, "The research is well-supported, involves both military and civilian investigators, and in many cases has been linked with facilities associated with BW [biological warfare] research and development."

- The CIA has learned that the Soviets are investigating a number of specific compounds

"which appear to have considerable potential as BW agents." These include "silicon-containing and organofluorine compounds . . . marine neurotoxins and blue-green algal neurotoxins."

- The CIA has figured out some of the features the Soviet scientists are looking for in their biological agents. These include persistence, stability, adaptability to special carrier solutions and the ability to be disseminated in such tiny particles that the poison will penetrate gas masks.

- "Extremely rapid-acting incapacitants are also of growing concern," the CIA reports. Already these knockout gases have been used in Afghanistan, where they are known as "the silent killer" because victims appear to have been flash-frozen without even knowing what hit them.

- The CIA has gotten a wealth of information on Soviet biological-weapons operations straight from the horse's mouth—a key Soviet source who defected. He reported that in the 1970s a proposal was made to the Central Committee and the Ministry of Defense for research on psychochemicals as chemical warfare agents. The program was given the go-ahead and funding.

The Soviet told the CIA that "yellow rain"—the toxic weapon believed to have killed thousands in Laos and elsewhere—was "a simple agent" compared with those currently being developed.

To say the U.S. intelligence community is concerned about all this would be an understatement. The CIA reports make clear that, far from having any idea of antidotes, our experts can't even identify many of the biological poisons the Soviets have been developing.